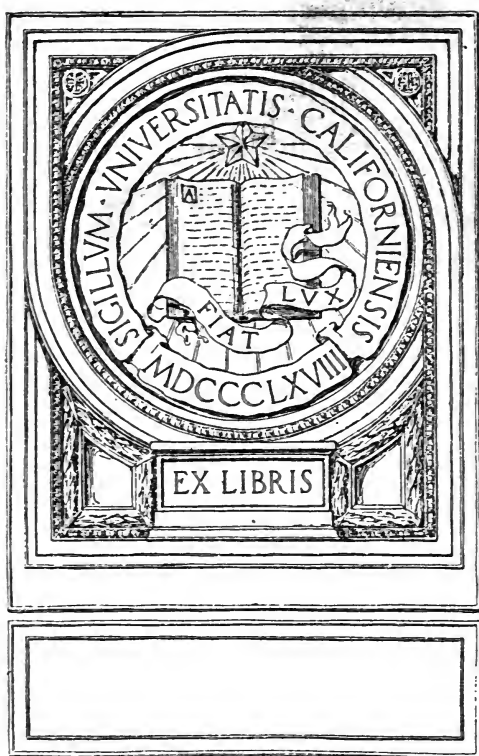


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PLAYTHINGS

Second Edition

BUREAU of EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS

1919



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Second Edition

BUREAU *of* EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS
16 WEST 8TH STREET, NEW YORK



COULD THERE BE A BETTER USE FOR A LABORATORY FLOOR?

PLAYTHINGS

WHAT is play?

The question seems simple. Yet the answers as they are silently expressed in the majority of schools and homes are strangely confused and superficial. For the most part they are based on the idea that play is a waste of time—good padding for the early childhood years before real things can begin, and later an interlude between periods of real accomplishment—to be tolerated because children will get ill if kept too closely to their books and tasks.

But, as is being more fully recognized each day, this negative assessment of the natural activities of little children is not merely inadequate. It is false. It makes us do wrong things to children. If we really understood play, we would be stirred by the scope of its educational possibilities. One vital aspect of play is the child's duplication or interpretation of the life processes going on around him. In their play, children create the world as they see it with the equipment they have at hand. And to them this created world is real—real as the artist's world is to him and in much the same way—realer than the adult's world which the adult would force upon him. Play, instead of being a wasted interlude in the learning process, *is* the process itself.

The kindergarten was founded upon play activities as grown people conceived them, and it made a distinction between systematized play and what was termed "free" play. The kindergarten never recognized the latter as a vital part of the educational process. But in the last few years, educators have dimly seen and slowly groped their way toward the fact that play is the child's method of experimenting with his environment. At the same time they have come to realize that experimenting is the soul of education; that much sound knowledge is gained by the trial and error method; that a child will continue to learn by the same process that he learned to walk—by falling down.

When these great, simple facts are appreciated, the problem of school and home assumes an entirely new aspect. How can they be made over into places where children can educate themselves, can learn through experimenting the meaning of the world they live in, and do it by the natural means of play? What must be done to furnish a genuine labora-

tory for children? What are the necessary appliances with which it should be equipped?

These are searching questions. They send a challenge to nearly everything which has been thought proper in a small child's school surroundings—the teacher's attitude, the classroom furniture, and the equipment.

In a little child's laboratory, the teacher becomes an observer of and specialist in play. She does not impose her personality or her methods upon the child. The child's world is his own world. He wishes to interpret that and not another's. The work of the teacher is not to lead him to see *her* world through his eyes, but to put before his eyes a world which he may make his own. For the child, the stimulus to experiment should come from the observation of the life of the city streets, or the farm, or the home, or whatever his environment happens to be. The teacher should put her energies upon the ordering and simplifying of this larger environment, rather than upon suggestions as to what the child shall do within his laboratory in experimenting with or interpreting this environment. The child's interpretation of his environment *is* play. No child need be taught it.

But if the child himself is to get from this interpretation all that it has to yield, he must be given the very best appliances to express this interpretation. And these appliances are technically "free materials"—colloquially, toys.

This word, like play, is burdened by the weight of years of misunderstanding and abuse. Toys have not been treated seriously. They have been regarded as a waste of money or as things to amuse children. With what consequences? What kinds of things have been given as toys? To begin with, boys have been given one kind, girls another. The environment of a brother and sister is the same, and yet, under no condition, has the little girl's interest been allowed to be the same as the boy's. The fact of their sex has been seized upon and emphasized until it has built a Great Wall of China across which a small girl may not venture without fear of being a hoyden, and a small boy, a "sissy." Moreover, the toys have not been toys with which children could do things. A set of tools occasionally came into a small boy's hands and released his pent-up desire to make, to construct. But, for the most part, boy and girl alike were limited to already finished objects which could merely be moved about or watched and not in a real sense played with.

The climax of absurdity in playthings is the so-called "mechanical



EVERY CLASS ROOM SHOULD HAVE A WORK-BENCH

toy." It does all the work. The child does nothing. Watch a child in front of a mechanical toy—say a miller who runs up a ladder and dumps a sack of grain down a chute. It seems to hold much of promise for interpreting a child's surroundings to him. He is fascinated by the first few trips of the miller. He endows the man with human qualities. He names him. Then, after the novelty has gone by, he longs to have his miller do something besides race up and down the ladder at superhuman speed. But the miller has no other possibility. So the toy is finally discarded, or, more probably, dissected by a bored child who wishes to find out how the little man works. The net result is a disappointed donor, an "ungrateful child," and a little heap of unusable rubbish. There exists, to be sure, another type of mechanical toy of which the electric engine is a good example. A toy of this type may be used as the basis of very wonderful constructive play for children old enough to "run it" themselves. But the usual type of mechanical toy should never be classed with toys at all. It is destructive of play.

Again, toys, even good toys, which help a child to duplicate the processes going on around him have never been planned together. They remain separate objects, unrelated units, disjointed bits of the universe, which grown-ups, having forgotten their own play-thoughts,

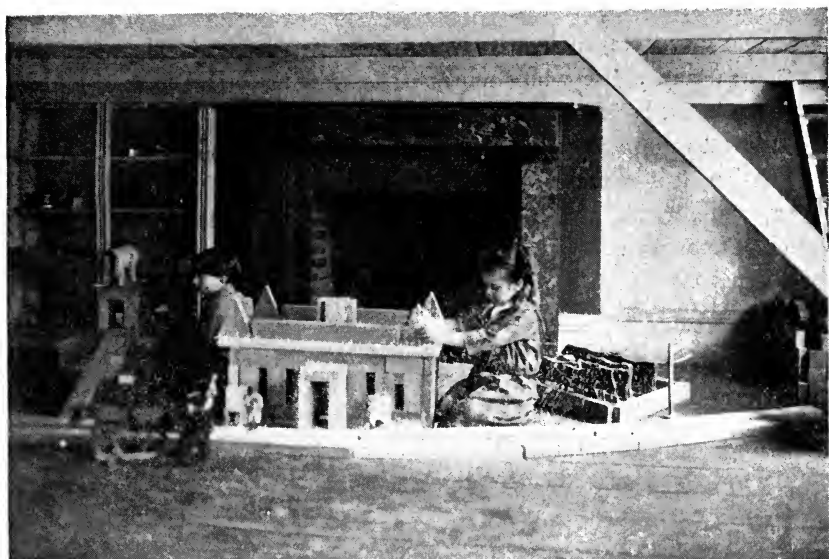


UP TO THE AGE OF SIX A CHILD IS AN INDIVIDUALIST

imagine children are interested in. It is difficult to reconstruct a sector of life with a two-foot rag baby, a four-inch wagon and a rocking-horse.

Toys—real toys—are the tools of play. And since play is serious business for children, these tools must be selected with serious intent. The requisite for toys is that they must be efficient as toys. That is, they should be suggestive of play and made for play. They should be selected in relation to each other, both in size and in kind. They should be consistent with the environment of the child who is to use them. They should be constructed simply, so that they may serve as models for other toys to be constructed by the children. They should suggest something besides domestic play, so that the child's interests may be led to activities outside the home life. They should be durable, because they are the realities in a child's world and deserve the dignity of good workmanship.

Toys of this sort may obviously form an equipment for a child's laboratory, and anything which answers these requirements becomes in this sense a toy—a tool for play. Some toys of this sort—for example, blocks—are as old as the proverbial hills; they have even been used in the schoolroom. But to use them as a basis for constructing a miniature world, a world in which the related toys—the dolls and



"FREE MATERIALS" AID HIM TO ENTER THE SOCIAL WORLD

the horses—live, move, and have their being, an incomplete world which may be supplemented by all sorts of plasticene and bench-made things, a world, moreover, which may be decorated to any extent—to use blocks in this way is an innovation in education. Yet there is no appliance better suited to a laboratory for play than simple blocks.

Work benches, with real tools, are an essential for the laboratory. The possibility for purposive action which a work-bench holds is literally boundless.

So, too, with play materials, such as crayons, colored papers, plasticene and clay. If children are let alone with paper and pencil, they will quickly learn to use these playthings quite as effectively as they do blocks and dolls. Left to dig out for himself the "soul" of an object and transfer this soul to paper, which is, after all, the true province of art, a child under six may produce something that at first sight seems to our hide-bound imaginations grotesque. But rest assured that this absurdity is based on some reality. He has drawn the essential rather than the object itself. Take the small boy of six who drew aeroplanes, guns, ships, and then smudged the whole thing with red crayon. When asked what his drawing represented, he said, "Why, that's war. Isn't it a mess?" Or the child who drew a barely perceptible automobile in white crayon because, as he explained, "It's

going so fast you can't see it." Or again, the seven-year-old who passed a green crayon lightly over a sheet of paper and placed at the bottom a tiny figure who "thinks he is walking in the grass, but he really is in the bottom of the sea!"

If a laboratory is to give each child the full freedom for his own expression, it has to provide not only appliances which he can easily manipulate to his own ends, but physical space and guarantee from interruption as well. The ability of even well-to-do homes to command these last essentials is seriously threatened in these days of congested cities and small apartments. The school's task is no light one. It must see to it that children have the playthings which are the nucleus of a significant life-process known to them through their own experiences; that is, *toys* which are related and suggestive; that they have at hand materials with which they themselves can supplement these provided toys; and then, that they be given time and space in which to work out their own experiments in their own way. The easiest place for little children to play is on the floor. Why not a school floor? Why not let him construct his little scheme on the floor and then use this scheme to carry out in action whatever miniature dramatic situation he has created? Could there be a better use of a laboratory floor?

It seems obvious that a child turned loose with appropriate appliances—appropriate to his ends rather than the teacher's—will develop his own method of expression. He will enjoy it, too. For up to the age of six, a child is an extreme individualist. He does not naturally do things co-operatively. There comes a time, however, when he steps from his individualistic into a social world. The school should meet the requirements of his individualistic period and bridge the gap when he begins to be a communistic soul. Here again, toys—free materials—are the school's chief reliance. They adapt themselves to the needs of a project in which a whole group of children spontaneously develop joint floor schemes such as a section of a city with its streets full of autos and carriages, lined with trees, flanked by houses, restaurants with out-door gardens, railroad station with incoming and outgoing traffic, river with wharves and shipping, grocery shop, baker's shop, factories and all the endless array of industrial activities which make up our modern world. This is not a theoretic description. It is the kind of thing that those who work with free materials and comparatively free children constantly see. It is what keeps their courage steady!

But it is all important that a child should not be forced too soon into a social world. He must work his own way gradually from his



CHILDREN FASHION ALMOST ANYTHING INTO THEIR
DRAMATIC PURPOSES

own concrete interpretation of a special fact or situation to a social interpretation. To socialize a child's entire day implies that he has reached a stable stage where he has something to say which will contribute to the little society of which he is a part, and that he knows how to say it. It is doubtful if many children acquire this stability during "kindergarten age"—though the kindergarten practices are based on the assumption that they do.

There are, to be sure, some practical difficulties in devising a school-room where little children may have both ample privacy and ample social life, particularly if they work with free material. In one school, the mechanical difficulty has been met by two simple devices. Small, low, and easily handled screens are placed so as to give each child his own isolated space on the floor. Here he is free to follow his own bent—to draw, to model, or to construct and develop a miniature dramatic scheme, as he may desire. And when this individual expression is completed and the floor space is needed for common purposes, the screens may be removed. By the other device—a small balcony, easily built in any room—the additional space needed for co-operative "floor schemes" is secured. This balcony may be too low to let a grown-up pass underneath, but it doubles the space for the children.

Much of the furnishing of a schoolroom, such as screens, folding tables, chairs, rugs, etc., is good dramatic material. And so is whatever there may be in the way of outdoor apparatus. If children are encouraged to use materials freely, they fashion almost anything into their dramatic purposes. It is their natural attack on life.

But even if it be conceded that free play with appropriate play-things is good for little children, since it may make them resourceful and observant and independent, it does not logically follow that it covers the whole ground—that it is a substitute for “lessons”—that it gives the child the “tools of learning.” Of course, it is obvious that play-schemes may be made an excuse for making children swallow sugar-coated pellets of arithmetic and reading and writing. Devices of this sort to beguile the unsuspecting child have multiplied like weeds in recent classrooms. They are largely responsible for the common suspicion that freedom within a schoolroom must mean either coaxing or license. They are devices, nothing more. And they are a bit unworthy of the situation. It is not that the play of children affords an opportunity to slip in unnoticed something which an adult values, but which the child would repudiate if he were not duped. It is that interpretive play, constructive play, depends in its very essence upon the same relations, whether expressed in human terms or in books, upon which our real world depends. In order to carry on organized life, we find it necessary to use symbols. These symbols have grown up just because they are necessary to facilitate the processes of the world. The same necessity will be felt by the children in any play which reproduces these processes. And the use of symbols will grow up in the same natural way. Children cannot reproduce an environment which implies a number sense without having that number sense; children cannot do exact bench work without measuring; children cannot play store without arithmetic. This is less true of reading and writing.

It remains to be determined whether this means that reading and writing must be taught formally or that reading and writing are a later necessity for children. Our own experiment in this field seems to indicate that both of these contentions will be found true and that formal reading and writing come as a welcome opportunity at the age of eight or nine to children who have enjoyed a rich preparatory experience of constructive and interpretive play.

Such an experience, while it does not supply the necessary technique, makes definite contributions toward its acquisition and, a fact of greater

import, ensures the immediate use of any tool acquired for practical, purposeful ends. Thus the free use of crayons in big sweeps on large sheets of paper, the blackboard, or the floor, gives preliminary skill and confidence in manipulation. Early drawing may contribute by clearing up visual images. Enterprising play and work experiences demand clear and definite oral expression, ever the basis for clear written expression. After an extended period of such preliminary experiences children are ready to put real effort into the mechanics involved. In addition to the acquisition of contributory habits and skills they invariably bring to the situation considerable "picked up" knowledge of technique. Thus equipped they should learn to read through reading, and find no difficulty in using the tool of writing for thought expression.

The problem of reading and writing links itself very closely with the whole problem of the use of books, of stories and verse. The idea of giving children "free material" with which to experiment and to create has rarely been extended to language. Books for children have been like the toys of old—to amuse; or like the lessons of old—to instruct.

The effort to amuse has produced a literature of fairy tales—steeped in the imaginary romance of an imaginary world—a world which often confuses a child's thinking and seldom has any significance in understanding the very real romance of the modern world: it has produced the "story of adventure"—with its basic appeal to excitement, its familiarity with killing, impossible heroisms and violence of all sorts; it has produced the "animal story," in which the animal leaves both his nature and his habits and masquerades in human form, not uncommonly in human apparel. The effort to instruct children has produced a quite different but hardly more happy literature—if indeed it deserves that name at all. Facts chosen by an adult because of his own interest in them, presented to a child without being related to the child's experience, in a form which too often a child cannot perceive—such is the stuff of most of our informational books for little children. Readers—which constitute most children's introduction to "literature"—are pieced together from these two types of stories—the amusing and the instructive—and cast in a language intended to facilitate the technique of reading and the technique of writing regardless of the effect upon the art of reading or the art of writing. Care for a child's sensitiveness to sound, care for a child's natural play use of words, care for a child's interest in his own experiences and for his method of reaching the remote and the unfamiliar thru the immediate and the personal, care

for a child's creative power in language—these are not the things that have guided most of the adults who have written the books for little children.

We need a new literature for children. We need stories which recognize the art—the play spirit in words and which are cast in patterns which a child is equipped to see and enjoy. We need stories which will start with a child's own experiences and environment and thru following the line of his own inquiries, lead out from his immediate limited surroundings to richer, wider environments. We need parents and schools who will test the stories and verse which they give to their children not by what a child takes in but by what he gives out in stories and verse of his own creating. For create he will, if he is not diverted from his natural bent by some adult conception of what he should enjoy or should know. There is no telling how far the dramatic appeal of a story might carry a child into genuine scientific habits of thinking. There is no telling thru what new forms of play expression, of "literature," he might express himself, if language were to him "free material" suitable for play purposes. Not till we have this new literature will we have anything like a well-equipped laboratory for our little children.

COMMITTEE ON TOYS AND SCHOOL EQUIPMENT.

SUGGESTED READING

For convenience it has seemed well to divide the following list into two parts—the first devoted to the discussion of theory, the other offering concrete suggestions.

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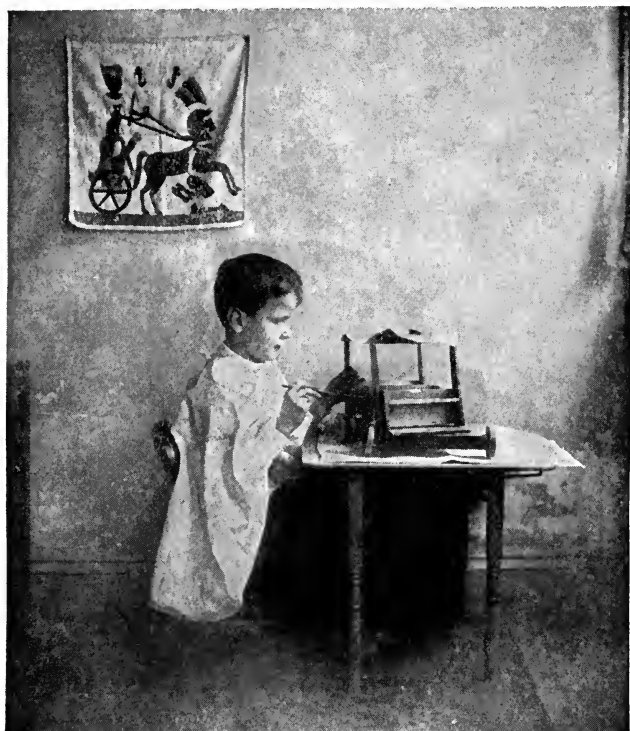
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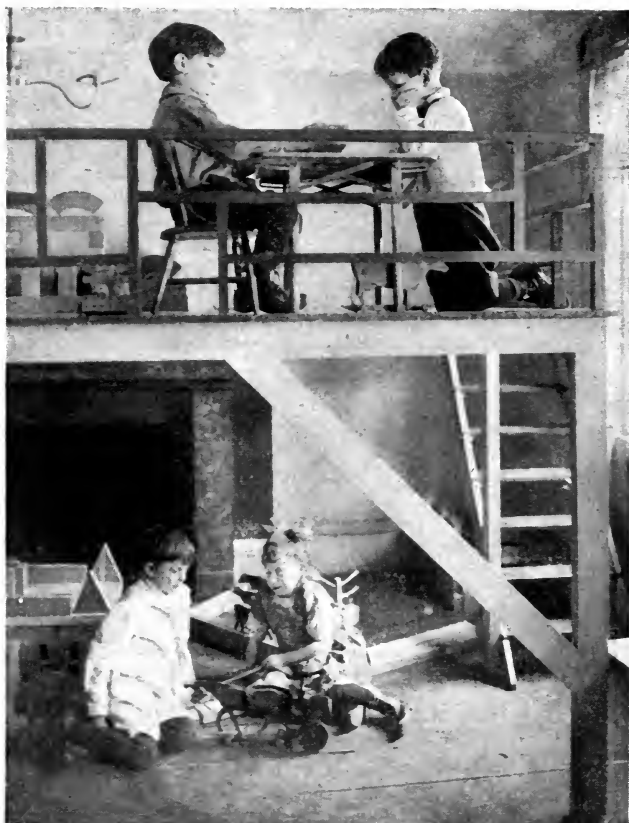
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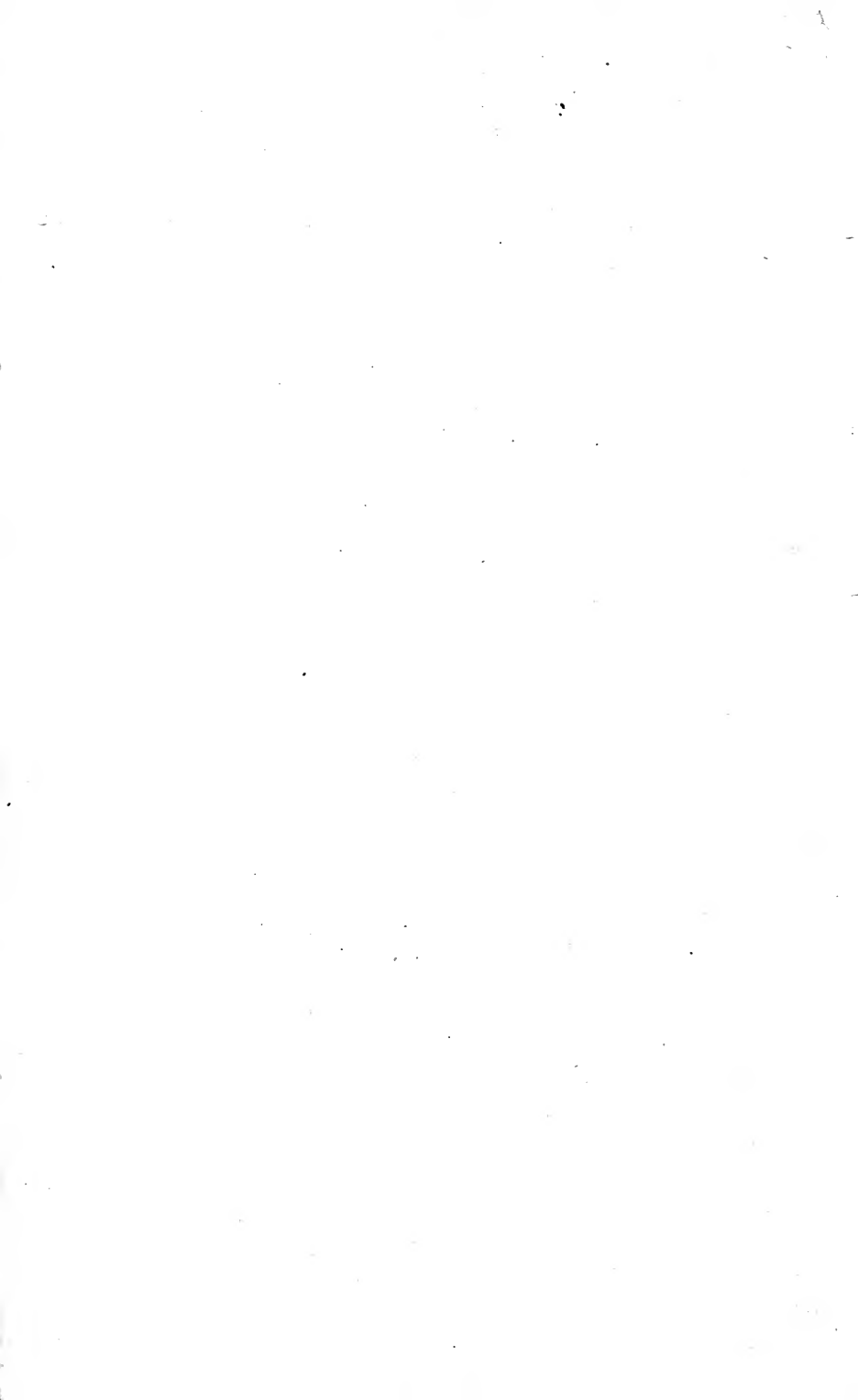




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